



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

# IFAS EXTENSION

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

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## **Fall is the best time to plant trees and shrubs**

Fall is finally here. The weather is becoming slightly cooler, and gardeners are slowly migrating back outdoors after a long, hot summer. Now is a perfect time to add new trees or shrubs to your landscape or transplant existing plants. The fall may be the best season to plant, surpassing even the spring.

Many people prefer planting in January through March, but the fall months of September through December have distinct advantages. Root growth is the major reason that planting in the fall months is highly recommended. Plant roots grow anytime the soil temperature is 40 degrees or higher, which may occur all winter in Northwest Florida. During the winter months, the root systems of the fall-planted specimens develop and become established. When spring arrives, this expanded root system can support and take advantage of the full surge of spring growth.

'Plan before you plant' is always a good rule of thumb. Whether you are planting a single plant or an entire landscape, plan first, then plant. Good planning is a worthwhile investment of time that will pay off in greater enjoyment of attractive and useful home gardens, and in increasing the value of your home. It's much easier to move plants on paper than to dig them after planting in the wrong place. A plan saves many planting mistakes.

Properly planting your trees and shrubs will provide them the best opportunity for success. Proper planting is a ten-step procedure.

Step one is to pick the right site. One of the most frequent mistakes made in landscape installation is not considering the mature size of the plant. When planting trees be sure to look up! Avoid planting under electrical lines or house eaves that will cause problems later on.

Step two is to dig a shallow hole as wide as possible. A hole one-and-one-half to three times the width of the root ball is recommended. The depth of the hole should actually be less than the height of the root ball. If you happen to dig the hole too deep, be sure to fill the hole to the proper level and compact it with your foot. Planting too deep is a leading cause of death in newly planted trees and shrubs.

Step three is to find the point where the top-most root emerges from the trunk. Don't assume that plants you purchased have been planted correctly. Even with container plants, gently scrape away the soil until you can clearly identify the top-most root.

Step four is to place the plant gently into its new home. Handle plants by their root ball, not their trunk or stem. Recent studies have shown that slicing the root ball from top to bottom can be advantageous. While it doesn't increase root growth after planting, it does enhance the distribution of regenerated roots.

Step five is to position the plant so that the top-most root emerging from the trunk is slightly above ground level. It is better to plant a tree or shrub a little higher than too deep.

Step six is to straighten the plant. Before backfilling, take the time to view your new plant from several different perspectives and ensure that it looks straight to you.

Step seven is to remove all synthetic materials. String, rope, synthetic burlap, strapping, plastic, and other materials that will not decompose in the soil must be removed at planting.

Step eight is to fill the hole. Unless planting your trees and shrubs in a landscape bed, do not amend the soil. Extensive research on trees clearly shows that there is no need to incorporate any amendments, fertilizers, gels, powders, etc. into the planting hole. When the hole has been filled, and the root ball is slightly above the soil surface, use a shovel and make 20 to 30 slices to settle the soil. Do not pack the soil down with your feet in an attempt to eliminate air pockets because this could cause too much soil compaction. Water thoroughly and add more soil if needed.

Step nine is applying mulch around the newly planted plant. For trees, apply mulch to at least an eight foot diameter circle. Be careful, however, not to put mulch on top of the root ball. Be sure to water well after applying the mulch.

And the last step is to stake the plant, but only if necessary. The purpose of staking is to keep the root ball from moving while the tender roots are growing. Trees establish more quickly and develop a slightly stronger trunk and root system if they are not staked at the time of planting. Trees with trunk diameters of 1.5 inches and greater usually do not need staking. If large trees require staking to prevent the trunk from bending, it probably indicates a lesser quality tree.

Fall is for planting. Visit your nursery today, and beautify and add value to your home.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.